Reflecting Experiences of Working with White-Dominated, Publicly-Funded Institutions in the UK

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Sutapa Biswas, Harold Offeh, Nephertiti Schandorf

The Künstlerhaus Mousonturm Frankfurt approached me in 2017 to invite me to write about my relationship and involvements with white-dominated institutions in the UK. While I've had many experiences, I thought it would be useful to put my own experience into context by inviting other artists to reflect on their experiences too. Two people accepted my invitation. Artist Sutapa Biswas and independent curator Nephertiti Schandorf. Both of them have been extremely generous in sharing accounts of their experiences, advice for fellow artists and provocations for institutions. I would like to thank them for their honesty and openness. I hope our contributions can stimulate more discussion and provide insight and support to other artists.

Harold Offeh, November 2017

Through the Back Door. Entering and Encountering White Art Institutions

by Harold Offeh

As a Black artist who has been practising for over 20 years, I have had many encounters with white-dominated institutions. The nature of structural and institutional power makes this a given in the UK. I could easily speak at length to the conditions and encounters artists of colour have to face in relation to institutional power. These experiences are shaped by the conditions and terms with which one engages with these institutions. Just to be clear, I want to speak to some of my experiences of publicly-funded UK institutions. This obviously excludes experiences with other private institutions, and I do not claim to speak for all artists of colour in the UK. However, I feel it's important to address these cultural institutions and their practices, the nature of their public funding and the recent demands of governmental public policy. These policy agendas claim to diversify artists and audiences and have shaped the conditions of encounter that I and other artists of colour have experienced. While I've had good and bad experiences across the sector, I feel these overarching institutional agendas have shaped some invitations and opportunities.

It is generally accepted that there is still a need for greater representation of artists of colour or BAME (Black, Asian, minority ethnic) artists and audiences in UK galleries and museums. The Arts Council England is the main governmental arts agency (together with equivalent agencies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) that fund arts institutions in the UK. It has over successive years launched many initiatives to diversify the arts sector. These range from the current initiative, called *A Case for Diversity* to previous programmes such as *Decibel* which supported individual artists, including me, with large financial awards, but little media exposure. These programmes create a specific context whereby state-funded galleries need to show they are working with Black, Asian and ethnic minority artists and audiences. Inherently, these spaces are white-dominated and therefore a visible but unacknowledged colonial binary is set up.
White power needs black labour!

Across my career, my encounters with white-dominated institutions has been shaped by the hierarchical subdivisions of galleries and museums. Working with either curatorial or education/learning departments at different, but sometimes the same institutions. There has been a traditional top-down structure in the interplay between these two divisions in galleries. Normally, curatorial departments deal with and provide the thrust of programming. Selecting artists, putting together exhibitions and framing discourse in the service of contemporary culture, art history and, of course, the art market. The education department's role has traditionally been to interpret and mediate the curatorial programme for specific audiences, school kids, families, the poor etc. A dual shift occurred in the 1990s. The rise of institutional critiques, developed by artists like Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson together with the curatorial turn to relational aesthetics began to destabilize and challenge some of these hierarchies.

In my experience, there was certainly an emphasis placed on the educational departments of museums to fulfil the diversity agenda. Working with Black, Asian and ethnic minority artists would allow institutions to show an engagement with diverse artists with the added benefit of bringing in diverse audiences. In fairness, I have to acknowledge the honesty and integrity of some of the mainly white, female learning and educational curators who have a commitment and genuine belief in engaging audiences and supporting a diversity of art practice. My problem is that existing structures allowed curatorial and collection departments to get away without a committed or structural investment in supporting BAME artists. In the 1990s, the YBA (Young British Artists) phenomenon whitewashed the UK art scene. Writer Eddie Chambers gives a good overview of this period in his book, *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s* (Chambers 2014).

Noticeable figures like Chris Ofili, Steve McQueen and Yinka Shonibare managed to exist outside or parallel to the YBA narrative of British Art, but they seemed to be the exception. Perhaps in response to this white canonical history artists like Sonia Boyce, Susan Pui San Lok and curator Paul Goodwin are part of a larger team who have set up a three-year research project: *Black Artists and Modernism.* Its stated aims are:

“For several centuries Britain has introduced some of the most important art and artists to the world. Despite this rich history, the art history of the nation’s own black artists (a term that exceeds the limitations of race to encompass political and cultural solidarity) remains under-recognised nationally and internationally. *The Black Artists and Modernism* project promises to correct these various omissions.” (Boyce et al)

There is often a palpable difference in status between the artists who get to work with the educational department and those working with curatorial departments at the same institution. Artists in educational contexts tend to be women and artists of colour, which further highlights the difference. Recent statistical evidence is hard to source, however a 2003 study indicated that 85% of gallery educators were women and 94% were white (Garret 2004: 3). In a published discussion to mark its 25th anniversary, Felicity Allen, the former director of *engage: The National Association for Gallery Education* in the UK, highlighted that “gallery education was, and still is, a profession populated mostly by women” (Raney 2015: 7).

What can also be just as frustrating, is that the work produced in the context of education programmes can be more complex, challenging or allow for innovative methodologies and outcomes. However, a lack of critical discourse, by this I mean writing, publications, peer reviews, symposia etc. often means this work operates in a vacuum and lacks the cultural capital afforded to the works produced within a curatorial context.

I can speak to two specific experiences I have had. *The Mothership Collective* was a project I developed in response to an invitation from South London Gallery to programme a series of public workshops in August 2006. One of the clear parameters of the project was that the project had to engage a diversity of audiences and it had to fill the traditional art graveyard period of August. I jumped at the opportunity to work in the space and in response, I developed a curatorial approach. *The Mothership Collective* involved 20 artists being invited to devise one-day workshops with audiences that would result in a month-long programme.

I managed to incorporate a short exhibition period to display the results of the workshops. It was a hugely rewarding experience, well supported by the gallery and hugely helped to develop my practice. But its limited exposure and framing as an educational project, with a lack of press, reviews, marketing etc. meant the project didn't exist in conversation with anything else. I had a similar experience with the Tate Learning project *RadioCity* in 2016. The project was developed in collaboration with artist Marion Harrison and curators from Tate's early years and families team. The academic Dr Judith Stewart sums up the situation well, she perceives "a divide between exhibiting artists and participatory artists. Participatory artists, who show the gallery's inclusiveness and bring in funding, often feel invisible and marginalised, both because of their positioning in education programmes, and because a higher value seems to be placed on certain types of audience" (Raney 2015: 12).

I am citing these examples not out of bitterness. These experiences are symptomatic of a failure of institutions to recognise, support and promote the creative production they are commissioning across all areas of the institution. There are sometimes good reasons for this, one might take into consideration the ethics of working with vulnerable groups for example. But more often, it is because education departments models of success are determined by: numbers of "hard to reach" groups who engage or sheer numbers of participants or the perceived social benefits. Here, social capital is the currency. You could argue, that is a great thing, which it is. But this social capital often negates the cultural capital and investment in artists, and that often means women and artists of colour in this context. There are some good examples in the UK that counter this narrative. The Showroom Gallery in London under director Emily Pethick has an integrated programme with no division between curatorial and learning departments. And more recently even Tate has developed a more cross-programming approach. But implementation and innovation is very patchy and inconsistent across the arts sector in the UK. Integrated or cross departmental programming presents a challenge to the power of exhibition curators and the ability to be gatekeepers and tastemakers.

We have to recognise that artists of colour have over time been continuously invited into white-dominated publicly-funded spaces through the back door of educational departments. I personally believe this back door is often a more interesting entrance. A new generation of artists have been able to transition from learning to curatorial exhibition spaces – UK artists like Larry Achiampong and Evan Ifekoya are amazing testaments to that. But this still masks structural inequalities and the lack of representation of people of colour in curatorial and senior management positions. Once again, the tiresome task of calling this out falls upon people of colour. We need new models and innovative approaches that challenge the present institutional paradigms. Both working within and externally to existing structures, the calling of institutions to account must continue.

What advice would you give to artists of colour working with white-dominated, publicly-funded institutions?

- Be strategic in the long-term and develop day to day tactics.
- Build alliances both inside and outside institutions.
- Instrumentalise the institution.
- Recognise that artists also learn in education and learning departments.

A provocation in the form of a word or short phrase or question for white-dominated, publicly-funded institutions?

- Every publicly-funded gallery should document and archive their learning and education programmes. Create platforms to disseminate the knowledge that is produced across the institution.

Reflections of Working as an Artist with Museums and Art Galleries in the UK by Comparison with those Based in the States, and in Canada

by Sutapa Biswas

My experience as an artist of professionally exhibiting within the context of museums and galleries for over 30 years has been varied. By and large, it has been a positive experience, perhaps in part because I have been selective in working with curators whose work I respect and who by and large have been respectful of my practice and considerate in how they treat living artists. Nevertheless, it has not always been so positive. I think, however, it is difficult to generalise because to an extent my experiences were often determined by the extent to which a curator or curatorial team have been supportive or even dedicated to the thematic interests of my works, or rather to underlying discourses of the exhibition in question that my works were included in. Often, the dynamics may also be conditioned by the extent to which a director of a particular museum or its governing board of directors were themselves invested in the kinds of questions the exhibition raised.

By way of comparison, I would like to consider two examples of working within two major historic museums and art galleries. The first is the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), which at the time of my collaboration was the second largest municipal art gallery and museum in Canada. The second is Tate Britain (UK). They present interesting examples because both collaborations were initiated by education programmes department in the respective museums.

At the AGO, its then curator and head of programmes, Dr Judith Mastai, directly approached me in 2000 to discuss the possibility of my undertaking a project in collaboration with her at the AGO, the dimensions and ambitions of which she remained open to and made clear she would support

me with to the best of her ability. This was in fact the second occasion on which I had collaborated with Judith – having designed and successfully delivered an ambitious project developed by me in collaboration with Judith over a period of almost twelve months, ten years previously, when she was working in the Education Department of an important museum and gallery in Vancouver – the Vancouver Art Gallery. For purposes of this article, I am going to focus on the AGO. What was interesting to me was the appreciation and Judith's engagement with my artistic practice, but additionally her understanding and support of the broader context of my approach to thinking about art and its function within a pedagogic context.

Judith effectively invited me to the AGO, to explore its archives, its collections, its histories. Furthermore, even though she herself was very aware of the strained and hierarchical nuances that can exist between the curatorial staff within large municipal institutions and those who work within the Educational Programmes (Judith was also a recognised member of the AGO's curatorial team), she worked hard to ensure that importantly, as a visiting artist, I was given access to the curatorial team, who were hugely supportive of the curatorial project I was to devise and spearhead. The exhibition I curated was titled *Private Thoughts / Public Moments* and involved my mentoring a group of younger South Asian women artists to create new works (albeit on a restricted budget) within the Historic Galleries of the AGO. It was the first project of its kind at the AGO, and in its realisation, Judith and I worked closely in conducting dozens of studio visits with local artists from a range of backgrounds, who were subsequently invited to submit proposals for a site-specific work at the AGO. Of all the proposals submitted, the most interesting responses happened to be from women artists from the South Asian diaspora. This further prompted a liaison with a Toronto-based South Asian arts organisation called SAVAC (one of whom was an intern at the AGO during the second stage of the project) and who also in the latter stages of my curating the site-specific exhibition were able to support my project as well as the selected artists whom I mentored.

In brief, the short and long term results of mounting this exhibition were manifold. It resulted in giving access to the historic archives to a group of young artists who had never previously experienced such luxuries. It introduced them to the context of histories of the works within the Historic Galleries at the AGO. It gave them access to working closely with the AGO's conservation team. It gave them access to curatorial and educational staff and support from both these teams. It inspired these young artists to believe that they had a claim in that institution, and inspired them to subsequently develop ambitious art projects of a pedagogic nature within other communities and frameworks in Toronto and elsewhere. My curatorial project *Private Thoughts / Public Moments* was launched in 2000 and was beautifully installed and extremely well received. Additionally, Judith ensured that my own artwork and place as an artist was not forgotten or excluded from the broader curatorial and exhibition programme at the AGO, and my own work was exhibited within one of the main contemporary art gallery spaces at the AGO, thereby recognising my own position as a professional artist within the structure of the project as a whole.

In 2014/15, a proposal for a new commission and artwork titled *Flights of Passage* was selected through peer review to be hosted at Tate Britain as part of a larger ambitious project titled *RadioCity 2014/15*. A collaboration between Tate's Early Learning Educational Programme, curated by the artists Harold Offeh and Marion Harrison, it invited a number of artists to be Artist in Residence during which time they developed an art work that incorporated sound to be broadcast on Resonance Radio 104FM and installed within Tate.

My work for this project, *Flights of Passage,* was two-fold in that I created an immersive installation within Tate's allotted space. Hung from a number of make-shift washing lines that criss-crossed the room from left to right were a multitude of saris (a garment traditionally worn by South Asian women, though not exclusively) that I borrowed from my immediate family, and extended family and friends. The borrowed saris ranged from antiques to more contemporary pieces – richly embroidered saris for special occasions as well as those more for everyday use. The fabrics within the saris also charted another kind of story, in that most

originated from different geographical regions of the Indian subcontinent, each sari telling its own story. Not only about its owner – but a story about the history of trade through textiles in India. Suspended in the space and swaying slightly in the breeze within the room, the overall structure created an eerie, yet comforting space for the viewing public as they walked through the installation and space. Within this space was a soundtrack compiled from conversations with members of the public who were invited to bring to the space (and talk about) an object that was of significance for them. These recorded narratives were each arranged taxonomically against a different letter of the English alphabet. This work continues a thematic interest as an artist that I have explored since 1984, which is my engagement with spatial stories and the everyday, seemingly inconsequential events that are reminders of the human condition.

I observed that on some level, the whole ambitious nature of this exciting project collaboration between Tate's Educational Early Learning Team, the artist Harold Offeh and Resonance Radio, seemed by and large to be overlooked by Tate's curatorial staff. The relationship between these respective teams, unlike at the AGO, were more remote and far more hierarchical. This was, I felt, surprising since it struck me that the very essence of *RadioCity 2014/15* was to create new pedagogic platforms for learning and shaping ideas between the artistic curatorial programme and the education department.

Perhaps something worth noting is that one of the members of public who participated in my particular project *Flights of Passage* (2015), contributing a moving oral narrative that was woven into to the structure of my sound component of this installation, was herself at the time a doctoral student of art history (*SOAS*). She was recently appointed as one of Tate's curatorial team, so in that sense it is interesting to me what the newer generations of Tate curatorial staff might potentially bring by way of changes to Tate's broader programmes in a curatorial context, as well as within the educational programme. Hopefully, there will be less hierarchy and more dialogue and collaborations.

In my professional view as an artist and educationalist, *RadioCity 2014/15* was a fantastically imaginative and beautiful project that will have had short and long-term impact on all those members of the public who encountered it. How do I know this? Well, I'm still in contact with many of those individuals who visited and/or participated by contributing their own oral narratives to the work I made whilst Artist in Residence at Tate Britain as part of *RadioCity 2014/15*. What a shame that so few of Tate's curatorial staff came by at the time to witness its impact on audiences who visited.

What advice would you give to artists of colour working with white-dominated, publicly-funded institutions?

- Know your worth.
- Establish what the parameters of a project might be and what facilities or materials will be made available to you in order for you to realise the outcome you hope to achieve to the best of your ability. Be open to learning and to discovering new things you never anticipated during the process of working with the institution – otherwise what's the point?
- Present a clear historical basis for the nature of your practise and work. By doing so you will push the expectations of the institution.
- Build alliances both within and outside the institutions. Support artists of colour and don't be complicit in the erasure of histories of struggles of POC, feminist and LGBT artists by an institution.
- Don't be afraid to disagree and simultaneously remain open to learning from those around you. Remain dedicated to broadening the spectrum of discourses that can affect change within these institutions over time in regards to questions of race, gender, class and sexuality.
- It helps to have a good sense of humour.
- If you have a genuine question or query, don't be afraid to ask for clarification.
- Enjoy your project. Know when to say no.

A provocation in the form of a word or short phrase or question for white-dominated, publicly-funded institutions?

- Enough time has passed since colonial histories first erased our voices. Wouldn't you agree that it is time we worked together in changing this?

The Nigredo Period (Reflecting on Time in an Ivory Tower)

by Nephertiti Schandorf

My experience of working with publicly-funded institutions began by way of an opportunity. A curator from one of the regional (non-London based) art galleries attended as a guest lecturer on my undergraduate course. It was with them that I volunteered as curatorial assistant while studying. The gallery had a strong focus on international art and provided the opportunity to support the installation and research of major exhibitions of artists of the African and South Asian diaspora. This was a deeply fulfilling two years of professional and creative development that gave me insight into the glorious Rube Goldberg machine that is exhibition making.

At the suggestion and encouragement from the curator and university faculty, I applied for an MA at a prestigious London university. Between accepting the place and enrolment, the head of programme had changed. Between the end of my first year and return one year later (after the death of my father) the head of programme and academic staff had changed once more. Over the course of three years, the programme had gone from having an international cohort to one that was majority white, affluent and European. This was also reflected in the change of teaching staff. It was during the year of my return that I experienced what Griselda Pollock referred to as the vicious antagonism between student and teacher.

My dissertation was based on the formation of creative networks of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora and how these groups negotiated institutions by way of government policy, art school and publicly-funded arts institutions. I had been fortunate enough to interview and speak frankly with highly influential black British artists and theorists whose careers had spanned decades. The research presented uncomfortable figures pertaining to the experiences and outcomes for students

and academic staff of the Afro-Asian diasporas. The dissertation critiqued the university for the lack of representation amongst senior/academic staff as well as another major institution for *diversity* programming and relationships with contemporary diasporic art practitioners. The feedback received became immensely personal; one of the grading tutors found the essay "depressing" (in the current colloquial, *show me the lie*) and they made reference to their parents being good people. Essentially, the personal, political and cultural struggles of generations of artists and practitioners led back to a person who had centred themselves by way of their own hurt feelings.

For the MA final show, there was immense tension between the programme and elements of the project, which culminated with veiled threats made to our future careers as curators. It was in this environment that the kyriarchies based in class and potential future cultural currency played out. After this experience of working with highly institutionalised curators the idea of working in a national gallery or art museum became anathema. By the time I had graduated, I believed that, due to a lack of institutional self-reflexivity, the major art school and art institution was the place where the zeitgeist went to die. By the time of presentation to the public by the establishment, cultural moments had been reformed and stripped of frisson and risk. Demographics had been considered, proposals made, assessments submitted, texts edited by committee and ambitions aligned with the corporate brand.

Although I am less doe-eyed and perhaps battle weary from exposure to the machinations of certain elements of the prestigious art school, the challenges presented benefits and a shift in perspective. I no longer aspired to be on the "inside" of a major public gallery. The question now is how will the institution assert cultural authority over the vibrant and rhizomatic art ecologies formed of diasporic artists and theorists that have developed beyond institutional reach? Networks and publics have formed away from the traditional centralised structures of large institutions. As these institutions seek to diversify their audiences (and funding streams) they must negotiate with groups of practitioners who

have thrived through necessity without them. The Internet has made possible the flourishing of aesthetic and cultural movements without passing through the filters of establishment gatekeepers. Examples are groups such as UK-based Black Blossoms and Bun/Babylon, who work to amplify the voices and professional potentials of black female practitioners, or the WhatsApp and Facebook messenger groups of artists and peers that are dedicated to providing insulation, opportunities and support networks.

Since graduating, I have worked in partnership with Somerset House, Tate, Jerwood Visual Arts and the Hayward Gallery. Large publicly-funded institutions are in possession of resources and talent that will influence future cultural archives. The teams I have collaborated with since graduation have been dynamic and supportive. My sanity is preserved by dipping into these institutions while maintaining a cordial distance – this may or may not be a sustainable strategy. There is still a conscious decision to avoid diversity programming while balancing visibility and career viability – not just for myself but also for my peers. From speaking with those who came through the times of the Gulbenkian Foundation attempting to deal with "the black problem" in 1973 (Araeen), Naseem Khan's *The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (1976) and the "Battle of Brixton" (1981) it would be disingenuous to say that we as black professionals functioning in institutions experience the very same hostilities, but there is still much that needs to be addressed and changed in terms of meaningful representation within programming, staffing and collections.

What advice would you give to artists of colour working with white-dominated, publicly-funded institutions?

- Know your value and worth (remuneration and cultural).
- Ask questions and engage with the various departments that form the institution.
- Push for what you want. The chances are, if the institution can support an idea, they will.
- Avoid reacting and take time to respond if you are presented with a negative or disappointing situation from the institution.

- Don't be seduced by the offer of showing during Black History Month.
- Research the institution's programming: Are you being positioned as an artist, an entertainer or educator? Has the institution shown commitment to developing diverse audiences and supporting various types of artists and their practice?

A provocation in the form of a word or short phrase or question for white-dominated, publicly-funded institutions?

- Show me the lie.

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